**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**LUKE-067**. **THREE KINDS OF PRAYING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. And He spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint; 2. Saying, There was in a city a judge, which feared not God, neither regarded man: 3. And there was a widow in that city; and she came unto him, saying, Avenge me of mine adversary. 4. And he would not for a while: but afterward he said within himself, Though I fear not God, nor regard man; 5. Yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me. 6. And the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge saith. 7. And shall not God avenge His own elect, which cry day and night unto Him, though He bear long with them! 8. I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall He find faith on the earth? 9. And He spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: 10. Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. 11. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as Other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. 11. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. 13. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. 14. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted."*

*Luke 18:1-14*

The two parables in this passage are each prefaced by Luke's explanation of their purpose. They are also connected by being both concerned with aspects of prayer. But the second was apparently not spoken at the same time as the first, but is put here by Luke as in an appropriate place.

**I. The wearisome widow and the unrighteous judge.**

The similarities and dissimilarities between this parable and that in chapter 11:5-8 are equally instructive. Both take a very unlovely character as open to the influence of persistent entreaty; both strongly underscore the unworthiness and selfishness of the motive for yielding. Both expect the hearers to use common-sense enough to take the sleepy friend and the worried judge as contrasts to, not parables, of Him to whom Christians pray. But the judge is a much worse man than the owner of the loaves, and his denial of the justice which it was his office to dispense is a crime; the widow's need is greater than the man's, and the judge's cynical soliloquy, in its unabashed avowal of caring for neither God nor man, and being guided only by regard to comfort, touches a deep depth of selfishness. The worse he was, the more emphatic is the exhortation to persistence. If the continual dropping of the widow's plea could wear away such a stone as that, its like could wear away anything. Yes, and suppose that the judge were as righteous and as full of love and wish to help as this judge was of their opposites; suppose that instead of the cry being a weariness it was a delight; suppose, in short, that, to go back to chapter xi., we call on Him as Father who, without respect of persons, judgeth: then our continual comingwill surely not be less effectual than hers was.

But we must note the spiritual experience supposed by the parable to belong to the Christian life. That forlorn figure of the widow, with all its suggestions of helplessness and oppression, is Christ's picture of His Church left on earth without Him. And though of course it is a very incomplete representation, it is a true presentation of one side and aspect of the devout life on earth. In the world ye shall have tribulation, and the truer His servants are to Him, and the more their hearts are with Christ in God, the more they will feel out of touch with the world, and the more it will instinctively be their adversary. If the widow does not feel the world's enmity, it will generally be because she is not a widow indeed.

And another notable fact of Christian experience underlies the parable; namely that the Church's cry for protection from the adversary is often apparently unheard. In chapter xi. the prayer was for supply of necessities, here it is for the specific blessing of protection from the adversary. Whether that is referred to the needs of the Church or of the individual, it is true that usually the help sought is long delayed. It is not only souls under the altarthat have to cry How long, O Lord, dost Thou not avenge?One thinks of years of persecution for whole communities, or of long, weary days of harassment and suffering for individuals, of multitudes of prayers and groans sent up into a heaven that, for all the answers sent down, might as well be empty, and one feels it hard to hold by the faith that verily, there is a God thatheareth.

We have all had times when our faith has staggered, and we have found no answer to our heart's question: Why tarry the wheels of His chariot?Many of us have felt what Mary and Martha felt when Jesus abode still two days in the place where He wasafter He had received their message, in which they had been so sure of His coming at once when He heard that he whom Thou lovest is sick, that they did not ask Him to come. The delays of God's help are a constant feature in His providence, and, as Jesus says here, they are but too likely to take the life out of faith.

But over against these we have to place Jesustriumphant assurance here: He will avenge them speedily. Yes, the longest delay may yet be right early, for heaven's clock does not beat at the same rate as our little chronometers. God is the God of patience, and He has waited for millenniums for the establishment of His kingdom on earth; His own electmay learn long-suffering from Him, and need to take to heart the old exhortation, If the vision tarry, wait for it, for it will surely come, and will not tarry. Yes, God's delays are not delays, but are for our profit that we may always pray and not faint, and may keep alight the flame of the sure hope that the Son of man cometh, and that in His coming all adversaries shall be destroyed, and the widow, no longer a widow, but the bride, go in to the feast and forget her foes, and the days of her mourning be ended.

**II. The Pharisee and the publican.**

Luke's label on this parable tells us that it was spoken to a group of the very people who were personated in it by the Pharisee. One can fancy their faces as they listened, and how they would love the speaker! Their two characteristics are self-righteousness and depreciation of every one else, which is the natural result of such trust in self. The self-adulation was absolute, the contempt was all-embracing, for the Revised Version rightly renders set all others at nought. That may sound exaggerated, but the way to judge of moral characteristics is to take them in their fullest development and to see what they lead to then. The two pictures heighten each other. The one needs many strokes to bring out the features, the other needs but one. Self-righteousness takes many shapes, penitence has but one emotion to express, one cry to utter.

Every word in the Pharisee's prayer is reeking with self-complacency. Even the expression prayed with himselfis significant, for it suggests that the prayer was less addressed to God than to himself, and also that his words could scarcely be spoken in the hearing of others, both because of their arrogant self-praise and of their insolent calumnies of all the rest. It was not prayer to God, but soliloquy in his own praise, and it was in equal parts adulation of himself and slander of other men. So it never went higher than the inner roof of the temple court, and was, in a very fatal sense, to himself.

God is complimented with being named formally at first, and in the first two words, I thank thee, but that is only formal introduction, and in all the rest of his prayer there is not a trace of praying. Such a self-satisfied gentleman had no need to ask for anything, so he brought no petitions. He uses the conventional language of thanksgiving, but his real meaning is to praise himself to God, not to thank God for himself. God is named once. All the rest is I, I, I. He had no longing for communion, no aspiration, no emotion.

His conception of righteousness was mean and shallow. And as St. Bernard notes, he was not so much thankful for being righteous as for being alone in his goodness. No doubt he was warranted in disclaiming gross sins, but he was glad to be free from them, not because they were sins, but because they were vulgar. He had no right to fling mud either on all the restor on this publican, and if he had been really praying or giving thanks he would have had enough to think of in God and himself without casting sidelong and depreciatory glances at his neighbours. He who truly prays sees no man any more, or if he does, sees men only as subjects for intercession, not for contempt. The Pharisee's notion of righteousness was primarily negative, as consisting in abstinence from flagrant sins, and, in so far as it was positive, it dealt entirely with ceremonial acts. Such a starved and surface conception of righteousness is essential to self-righteousness, for no man who sees the law of duty in its depth and inwardness can flatter himself that he has kept it. To fast twice a week and to give tithes of all that one acquired were acts of supererogation, and are proudly recounted as if God should feel much indebted to the doer for paying Him more than was required. The Pharisee makes no petitions. He states his claims, and tacitly expects that God will meet them.

Few words are needed to paint the publican; for his estimate of himself is simple and one, and what he wants from God is one thing, and one only. His attitude expresses his emotions, for he does not venture to go near the shining example of all respectability and righteousness, nor to lift his eyes to heaven. Like the penitent psalmist, his iniquities have taken hold on him, so that he is not able to look up. Keen consciousness of sin, true sorrow for sin, earnest desire to shake off the burden of sin, lowly trust in God's pardoning mercy, are all crowded into his brief petition. The arrow thus feathered goes straight up to the throne; the Pharisee's prayer cannot rise above his own lips.

Jesus does not leave His hearers to apply the parable, but drives its application home to them, since He knew how keen a thrust was needed to pierce the triple breastplate of self-righteousness. The publican was justified; that is, accounted as righteous. In the judgment of heaven, which is the judgment of truth, sin forsaken is sin passed away. The Pharisee condensed his contempt into this publican; Jesus takes up the thisand turns it into a distinction, when He says, this man went down to his house justified. God's condemnation of the Pharisee and acceptance of the publican are no anomalous aberration of divine justice, for it is a universal law, which has abundant exemplifications, that he that exalteth himself is likely to be humbled, and he that humbles himself to be exalted. Daily life does not always yield examples thereof, but in the inner life and as concerns our relations to God, that law is absolutely and always true.